The data item may include any type of data, including the text of a periodical (e.g., a magazine), audio data (e.g., music), or visual data (e.g., still pictures or video).

Other techniques may be used to help to prevent unauthorized dissemination of the group private key or the negative consequences of such dissemination. For example, it may arranged that the group private key is retrievable only by a complex spread-spectrum wireless transfer technique or is otherwise further protected in hardware, or is effective only temporarily.

For a reason such as a reduction in transaction time between the sender computer and the recipient computer, the encrypted data item may be stored in a publicly accessible location (e.g., on the Internet) so that only the permission data need be transferred from the sender computer to the recipient computer. In such a case, the encrypted data item may be freely transferred and copied by anyone, but the permission data is transferred only under the control of the usage permission transfer procedure.

What is claimed is:

1. A method for use in distributing access to a data item, comprising:

allowing multiple transfers between computers of a single instance of permission to gain access to the data item, the transfers occurring across data connections and including a first transfer between a first computer and a second computer and a subsequent transfer between the second computer and a third computer, wherein at any one time only one computer retains the

instance of permission and is able to use the instance of permission to gain access to the data item.

2. The method of claim 1, further comprising:

using an encryption key to impede unauthorized access to the data item.

3. The method of claim 1 wherein at least one of the transfers of permission includes the transfer of a first encryption key.

4. The method of claim 3, further comprising:

using a second encryption key to encrypt the first encryption key prior to transfer.

5. The method of claim 4, wherein the first encryption key includes a secret key and the second encryption key includes one of the keys in a public/private key set.

6. The method of claim 1, further comprising:

using highly secure circuitry to help ensure that at any one time only one of the computers retains and is able to use the instance.

7. The method of claim 6, wherein the highly secure circuitry includes a smartcard computer.

8. The method of claim 6, wherein the highly secure circuitry includes a de-encryptor.

9. The method of claim 6, further comprising:

storing an encryption key in the highly secure circuitry.

10. The method of claim 9, further comprising:

using the encryption key only within the highly secure circuitry.

11. The method of claim 1, further comprising:

determining whether a computer is authorized to receive the instance of permission to gain access to the data item.

12. The method of claim 1, further comprising:

according to an expiration time, rendering at least one of transfers temporary.

13. The method of claim 12, further comprising:

in the temporary transfer, transmitting a copy of an encryption key from a sender computer to a recipient computer, and, at the expiration time, erasing the copy of the encryption key from the recipient computer.

14. The method of claim 1, further comprising:

in one of the transfers, transmitting a copy of an encryption key from a sender computer to a recipient computer, and erasing the copy of the encryption key from the sender computer.

15. The method of claim 1, further comprising:

associating at least one of the transfers with a transfer of funds.

16. The method of claim 1, further comprising:

distinguishing between different instances of permission to gain access to the data item.

17. The method of claim 1, wherein at least one of the computers includes a Web server computer.

18. The method of claim 1, wherein at least one of the computers includes a book viewing device.

19. The method of claim 18, wherein the book viewing device includes a viewing screen and data communications circuitry.

20. A method comprising:

in accordance with access distribution parameters that are specific to a data item and that were established by a first computer, transferring, across a data connection from a second computer to a third computer and independently of the first computer, permission to gain access to the data item.

21. A method comprising:

impeding a change to the number of computers that are allowed to gain access to a data item, independently of data connection transfers between computers of permission to gain access to the data item.

22. A method for use in distributing access to a data item, comprising:

providing a first computer with permission to gain access to the data item;

providing the permission by data connection to a second computer substantially simultaneously with removing the permission from the first computer; and

providing the permission by data connection to a third computer substantially simultaneously with removing the permission from the second computer.

23. A method comprising:

rendering accountably fungible an instance of permission data that allows a computer to gain access to book data.

24. A method for use in distributing access to a book data item, comprising:

associating highly secure circuitry with a device that is able to send and receive access data that is necessary to gain access to the book data item, the

highly secure circuitry including a computer processor and a program memory and being able to substantially prevent an unauthorized transfer of the access data from the device.

25. A method for use in distributing access to a book data item, comprising:

at a publisher computer, storing publisher permission data that allows a number A of end-user computers to gain access to the book data item;

based on the publisher permission data, providing a distributor computer with distributor permission data that allows a number B of end-user computers to gain access to the book data item;

changing the publisher permission data so that the publisher permission data allows only a number A-B of end-user computers to gain access to the book data item;

based on the distributor permission data, providing a retailer computer with retailer permission data that allows a number C of end-user computers to gain access to the book data item;

changing the distribution permission data so that the distributor permission data allows only a number B-C of end-user computers to gain access to the book data item;

based on the retailer permission data, providing an end-user computer with end-user permission data that allows 1 end-user computer to gain access to the book data item; and

changing the retailer permission data so that the retailer permission data allows only a number C-1 of end-user computers to gain access to the book data item.

26. A system for use in distributing access to a data item, comprising:

data processing apparatus for allowing multiple transfers between computers of a single instance of permission to gain access to the data item, the transfers occurring across data connections and including a first transfer between a first computer and a second computer and a subsequent transfer between the second computer and a third computer, wherein at any one time only one computer retains the instance of permission and is able to use the instance of permission to gain access to the data item.

27. A system comprising:

a transferor, in accordance with access distribution parameters that are specific to a data item and that were established by a first computer, transferring, across a data connection from a second computer to a third computer and independently of the first computer, permission to gain access to the data item.

28. A system comprising:

an impedor impeding a change to the number of computers that are allowed to gain access to a data item, independently of data connection transfers between computers of permission to gain access to the data item.

29. A system for use in distributing access to a data item, comprising:

a first permission provider providing a first computer with permission to gain access to the data item;

a second permission provider providing the permission by data connection to a second computer substantially simultaneously with removing the permission from the first computer; and

a third permission provider providing the permission by data connection to a third computer substantially simultaneously with removing the permission from the second computer.

30. A system comprising:

a renderor rendering accountably fungible an instance of permission data that allows a computer to gain access to book data.

31. A system for use in distributing access to a book data item, comprising:

a device including highly secure circuitry, the device being able to send and receive access data that is necessary to gain access to the book data item, the highly secure circuitry including a computer processor and a program memory and being able to substantially prevent an unauthorized transfer of the access data from the device.

32. A system for use in distributing access to a book data item, comprising:

at a publisher computer, a storer for storing publisher permission data that allows a number A of end-user computers to gain access to the book data item;

a first permission provider for, based on the publisher permission data, providing a distributor computer with distributor permission data that allows a number B of end-user computers to gain access to the book data item;

a first permission changer for changing the publisher permission data so that the publisher permission data allows only a number A-B of end-user computers to gain access to the book data item;

a second permission provider for, based on the distributor permission data, providing a retailer computer with retailer permission data that allows a number C of end-user computers to gain access to the book data item;

a second changer for changing the distribution permission data so that the distributor permission data allows only a number B-C of end-user computers to gain access to the book data item;

a third permission provider for, based on the retailer permission data, providing an end-user computer with end-user permission data that allows 1 end-user computer to gain access to the book data item; and

a third changer for changing the retailer permission data so that the retailer permission data allows only a number C-1 of end-user computers to gain access to the book data item.

33. Computer software, residing on a computer-readable medium, comprising instructions for use in distributing access to a data item, the instructions causing a computer to:

allow multiple transfers between computers of a single instance of permission to gain access to the data item, the transfers occurring across data connections and including a first transfer between a first computer and a second computer and a subsequent transfer between the second computer and a third computer, wherein at any one time only one computer retains the instance of permission and is able to use the instance of permission to gain access to the data item.

34. Computer software, residing on a computer-readable medium, comprising instructions for causing a computer to:

in accordance with access distribution parameters that are specific to a data item and that were established by a first computer, transfer, across a data connection from a second computer to a third computer and independently of the first computer, permission to gain access to the data item.

35. Computer software, residing on a computer-readable medium, comprising instructions for causing a computer to:

impede a change to the number of computers that are allowed to gain access to a data item, independently of data connection transfers between computers of permission to gain access to the data item.

36. Computer software, residing on a computer-readable medium, comprising instructions for use in distributing access to a data item, the instructions causing a computer to:

provide a first computer with permission to gain access to the data item;

provide the permission by data connection to a second computer substantially simultaneously with removing the permission from the first computer;

provide the permission by data connection to a third computer substantially simultaneously with removing the permission from the second computer.

37. Computer software, residing on a computer-readable medium, comprising instructions for causing a computer to:

render accountably fungible an instance of permission data that allows a computer to gain access to book data.

38. Computer software, residing on a computer-readable medium, comprising instructions for use in distributing access to a book data item, the instructions causing a computer to:

associate highly secure circuitry with a device that is able to send and receive access data that is necessary to gain access to the book data item, the highly secure circuitry including a computer processor and a program memory and being able to substantially prevent an unauthorized transfer of the access data from the device.

39. Computer software, residing on a computer-readable medium, comprising instructions for use in distributing access to a book data item, the instructions causing a computer to:

at a publisher computer, store publisher permission data that allows a number A of end-user computers to gain access to the book data item;

based on the publisher permission data, provide a distributor computer with distributor permission data that allows a number B of end-user computers to gain access to the book data item;

change the publisher permission data so that the publisher permission data allows only a number A-B of end-user computers to gain access to the book data item;

based on the distributor permission data, provide a retailer computer with retailer permission data that allows a number C of end-user computers to gain access to the book data item;

change the distribution permission data so that the distributor permission data allows only a number B-C of end-user computers to gain access to the book data item;

based on the retailer permission data, provide an end-user computer with end-user permission data that allows 1 end-user computer to gain access to the book data item; and

change the retailer permission data so that the retailer permission data allows only a number C-1 of end-user computers to gain access to the book data item.